

Information Alert

June 2007

Tent Caterpillars Identified in Flagstaff

Tent caterpillars (*Malacosoma* species) are native insects found in northern Arizona forests and urban trees in the spring. The insect has been noted in the Flagstaff area mainly on Aspens.



This is the stage of the insect most visible in the Flagstaff area at the present time. The mature caterpillar is about 2 inches long. Its body is light brown, hairy with pale blue markings along the sides and has a blue head. They are not harmful to humans; however, the caterpillars may cause irritation of the skin if they are handled. They can be annoying when large numbers are found crawling or clustering on buildings, lawns and sidewalks. Use care not to crush too many caterpillars as they can cause surfaces to become slippery and greasy.

By the end of spring, mature caterpillars begin to feed in groups or singly. The caterpillar stage lasts about eight (8) weeks. It's during this stage that the caterpillars construct the conspicuous "tents" along the branches of their host. The size of the tents increases during the summer as the caterpillars develop. They finish feeding and spin a cocoon on branches, bark, tree trunks or in the soil. They remain in the cocoon stage for about two weeks. They transform into adult moths and emerge in July and August. Adult moths are light brown with a wingspan from one to two inches.



Adult moths are attracted to lights at night, and females may lay eggs on building surfaces near the lights. To reduce this problem, use yellow lights as night lights outside wherever possible during the flight period (July).

Tent caterpillars feed on developing buds, and young and mature leaves. Trees that are heavily infested with numerous tents, are often totally defoliated, but are seldom killed by the insect. The trees can experience reduced growth and become susceptible to other hazards such as drought, freezing or disease. A healthy tree which has been defoliated will usually grow new leaves by midsummer. Treatment is usually unnecessary unless the host is defoliated for several consecutive years.

Hosts of tent caterpillars in northern Arizona include oak, willow, poplar, ash, apple, apricot, cherry, plum, currant, sumac and hawthorn.

Mild winters may also produce higher populations of these insects. An assortment of natural factors including parasitic and predatory insects, birds and mammals regulate the caterpillar population.

For further information about this insect, or other forest health concerns in the Flagstaff area, contact Bob Celaya, Forest Health Specialist, Office of the State Forester, 602/771-1415.